

Feast of the Holy Trinity. 27 May 2018. Let's dance!

Who likes to be all on their own? For how long? A day? A week? A year? One of the movies starring Tom Hanks which intrigues and in a way terrifies me is 'Cast Away'. How would I cope if I was suddenly alone? Perhaps for the foreseeable future. Perhaps for the rest of my life. I don't think I would cope terribly well. Solitude and personal space are good. Yet we are made for community. We are made for relationship.

Thomas Hobbes was a 16th – 17th century philosopher who disturbed many people with his book on human nature and government called Leviathan. He famously and negatively observed that "life is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." Hobbes thought that was the natural state of human beings. When society, and by that he meant organised, government-controlled society, breaks down, Hobbes thought we would all revert to that depressing and negative state of being. So, Hobbes said, we need to be forced into cooperating by strong government. According to Hobbes we are made for relationship and community BUT we need to be forced into it for it to work, forced because it is the best thing for us all.

I don't want to be completely alone but I don't like the idea of coercion as a way of forcing me to cooperate with my neighbour.

John Donne, poet and Anglican priest whose life overlapped with the first half of the life of Thomas Hobbes, wrote "No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." Excuse his gender specific language. Neither is any woman an island entirely isolated and separate.

It has been suggested that what Donne meant is that when we try to live as if we were all self-sufficient individuals then life is poorer for us all. He wasn't saying the same thing as Hobbes though. Donne was not saying that we need to be forced into cooperating. It is a realisation of the heart, a deeper awareness of how we are connected, which touches us and leads us into community.

There is an African saying which has echoed around the world "It takes a village to raise a child." This concept is deeply challenging to the individualism which has been so prevalent and increasing over recent centuries in the developed western world. We are connected. We need community and relationship. We need each other to flourish and when we cooperate we are all richer and blessed.

The individualism which finds communal approaches to life deeply challenging or offensive was alive and active in 18th century England. It came here as a virus in the society transplanted from the First Fleet onwards. We see that attitude in the first, and continuing, encounters between the boat people who began to arrive in 1788 and the people whose ancestors had been in this land for over 40,000 years.

Perhaps three main waves of immigrants had come to Australia during those 40,000+ years but all of those people shared the same communal approach to community and relationships. The snag which provoked violent clashes between these people and the 18th century newcomers was different attitudes to property. In particular, livestock. For a society in which animals were food, shared, communally available it seemed that the newly arrived flocks were wonderful gifts. Much easier to catch and share than larger mammals which bounded away unless approached with great stealth!

The squatters and landowners, herd and flock owners objected to this communal sharing of their personal property and reacted with control, violence, suppression and legal devices which removed both the rights and the humanity of the aboriginal population. The new immigrants, across generations, down to ourselves, prospered from the result of those reactions.

Now, in our time, recognising the way in which we and our ancestors as new immigrants in this land have lived, we have begun to speak about reconciliation. Reconciliation. It is not just 'let's learn to get on'. It is also 'let us learn from one another and through that learning find a better way of being community, deeper relationships, richer expression of humanity'. It starts as well with honesty about what has been and what has been done.

Talking about reconciliation itself implies that we are not as connected as we have been and should be. It suggests that being in positive relationship is the best way to be. It declares that community in which there

is respect and love and mutual flourishing is better for all of us. It is not only those who were on the outside who are being recognised who benefit from deeper, more open and vibrant and engaged community. It is all of us. Reconciliation is about us all being more richly blessed.

Life should not be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish or short' for any of us. None of us is 'an island, entire of itself'

In that poem (Meditation XVII 'Devotions upon Emergent Occasions') John Donne went on to say: "any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind." Even more we can say, of the aboriginal population of this country as well of those who have come to us seeking asylum and refuge who have been placed in places of secondary punishment, any person's needless suffering diminishes me, because I am part of humanity. Their lives touch ours. We are connected, part of the main, part of community.

Today is the beginning of a week of prayer for Reconciliation. Praying, and acting, and being part of the change which is unfolding is a godly thing to do, because we are all community and connected.

Where is our inspiration for this? It comes from God. It comes for us as Christians not only from the many ways in which Jesus spoke about loving our neighbour, caring for one another, looking across the barriers of prejudice and stepping out in compassion. It comes not only from the many ways in which Saint Paul wrote about complementary community finding its deepest expression in cooperation, varieties of gifts which, by being shared, create a greater whole, and transcending prejudice by looking at ourselves and others from God's perspective. All these are part of the essential message of Christianity.

But there is another piece. It is in how as Christians we see the nature of God. At the heart of God there is community. Three in one. The Holy Trinity. Today in the Church Year we celebrate God Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three in one.

Who likes to dance? If I drew you up here to dance with me then we might not win a TV talent show but we would, I am sure, find some grace and cooperation and beauty in the combination of our movement. In the Orthodox Church tradition there is a beautiful image of this way of God being three in one which reflects this joy-in-being-community at the heart of God. In this tradition God the Holy Trinity is in 'perichoresis', a divine dance. We look at God and we see movement and mutuality and love. A divine dance. The word 'perichoresis' means a dance but it also has the beautiful sense of respectfully making room in that interaction. For the dance to work, for the rhythm to be found, each person makes space for the other to also be able to move, while remaining connected. Cooperation, in relationship.

What is created is more beautiful and fulfilling and creative and enriching because it is a connection engaged with respect, mutual love, desire for all involved to be blessed. How is this lived? In love. How is this seen? In love. How is this shared? In love. "God is love. And those who live in love live in God. And God lives in them." (1 John 4:16).

This is the image of community we have from God about how to be. This is the nature of God, at the heart of God. And we, who are made in the image of God, have the same nature at the heart of ourselves. The invitation is to live this, to know this, to share this, to dance this as we seek to be community; reconciled, blessed. As we cherish one another, in community.

May it be so among us.  
Holy Trinity, God of community  
touch our hearts with love  
so that we may discover, in community,  
the deepest love and deepest way of being.  
Amen.  
The dance continues ...

Paul Mitchell